

# A Hacker's Perspective on the Social Forums

by Mara Kaufman

Of the 155,000 people at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre this January, some were chosen by their communities to represent them. Some were sent by their organizations. Some were delegated by their constituencies. But many of us were there because we could be – paid activists, paid students, and people who can afford to take a week off of work in the middle of January. This is a key issue for the forum phenomenon: anybody can go, but going so far rests largely on a kind of privileged volunteerism.

My experiences at forums so far, at the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, the 2004 Mesoamerican Forum in San Salvador, the 2003 European Social Forum in Paris and at multiple mini-fora in Mexico and Central America over the past few years, have varied somewhat in that regard. But a common result, in differing degrees of risk and reality, is often NGOification – where salaried NGO workers who do not directly represent anyone can talk and make plans together according to their own organizational models, as well as the tendency toward a dominant, centralized model of organization for the sake of efficiency and manageability. Already much has been written about these critiques and possible reforms. Here I want to talk instead about how the issues of organizing and volunteerism that are implied in this discussion can be better confronted from a perspective that is more a "hack" than a model.

## *Which Common?*

In the 2003 World Social Forum there emerged a conflict of strategy and interest between the state left and the grassroots left, between party politics represented by the Brazilian PT (Workers' Party) and the "que se vayan todos" (get rid of all of them) symbolized by the Argentinean revolt. Complaints about the co-optation of the forum by party forces were common, with harsh critiques of an organizing structure that marginalized the plurality of participation, in particular anti-capitalist, non-party perspectives. I understand that the 2004 forum in Mumbai hosted a similar conflict. While this certainly still existed in the 2005 forum, widespread disenchantment with Lula and the loss of PT power in Porto Alegre has shifted this to some degree. Autonomy, understood most commonly as practiced by Zapatistas in Chiapas, the Piqueteros in Argentina, the MST (Landless Movement) in Brazil, and the Desobedienti in Italy, has significant resonance across the forum. Here the struggle is, in the words of the Zapatistas, not to take power but rather to exercise it; that is, where control of the state apparatus is rejected as a strategy to change society in favor of a much more diffuse revolution in social relations. This social revolution is unlimited by national boundaries and understood to be carried out by globally networked struggles. At the same time, a new argument has emerged that seems to revolve around the question of whether we meet, or construct commonality, around the "no's", or if we meet around the "yes's"? That is, is our commonality and constructive space found in our rejection of certain forms and denial of a certain kind of power, or in our projects and power to create something else?

## *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*

While this discussion occasionally became semantic and rhetorical, I think it points to a real issue in how we view organizing. The recognition that the supposedly opposed regulated state and "free" market usually represent the same side and the rejection of the party as the primary place of struggle and the state as the thing to be won has led to an embrace of the horizontal politics and the politics of the everyday identified with Zapatistas and Piqueteros and many others in movements around the world. The issue that surfaces here however is that the rejection of hierarchical organization and the

refusal of vertical structures of politics sometimes becomes the rejection of organization and the refusal of structure as such.

Argentinian activist and researcher, Ezequiel Adamovsky, gave a good example of this in discussing the current state of the autonomous neighborhood assemblies that formed after the 2001 crisis in Argentina. The network of neighborhood assemblies has diminished widely at all but a very small and localized level, he reported, in part because the horizontalism that characterized the emergence of the assemblies had been so focused on rejection – of power pyramids and a hierarchical division of labor – that no positive groundwork for consensus and coordination – a transparent distribution of tasks and clear democratic decision-making method – could be established. This failure led to the disintegration of some of the autonomous initiatives as activists resorted either to "old certainties," the drive to build a worker's party, or became comfortably isolated into very small circles of familiarity without the capacity to articulate the struggle with the larger society.

This "tyranny of structurelessness," Ezequiel quoted feminist Jo Freeman, is dangerous not because it gets us nowhere, but because it tends to allow a non-transparency of leadership and decision-making. The fear of delegating responsibility becomes a kind of privileged voluntarism: whoever has the connections and time, both elements of privilege, to get something done does it. The intended avoidance of hierarchical leadership leads to an open denial of power but a nameless and invisible informal structure of power where charisma or well-connectedness becomes the defining factor for emerging leadership. As Freeman says in her article, "structurelessness" is really only "informal structure," where "the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules." In movement politics, unstructured "open space" becomes a shady stand-in for democratic process.

In this situation people try to understand their choices, seeing a vertical or party organization on one side, so unjust and unfair and uninteresting that it will likely topple, and a lack of organization on the other so profuse and profound that it is clear that nothing will ever be built. To the question, "porque no se fueron todos?" (why didn't they all go?) they begin to wonder if its because we need some of them. Looking back and forth between these two choices of hierarchy versus structurelessness they tend to fall down the crack in between, banging their heads on both sides as they go.

### *Autonomy*

This conundrum of bad organization versus no organization stems I believe from a focus on the "no's" as the grounds for commonality. By the "no's," I am referring to one discourse within the forum that holds that the repetition of "no" – no to neoliberalism, no to privatization, no to imperialism, etc. – across contexts and struggles is what unites us, what provides for global struggle. The advocates of the potentiality of the "no's," concerned with the reproduction of hegemony, favor a multiplication of these rejections as a way to refuse one model but not impose unity in proposing another. But a focus on the no's tends to provide a vacuum, perhaps inviting an alternative but inviting any alternative. That is, some no's are not progressive. Some are easily co-opted. Some no's are accidentally or covertly yes's. Indeed, anti-globalization can easily be pro-capitalism. Starting from a theory of rejection, "autonomy" to some becomes a mere "separation from the official," a "neutral space." But the fact of being separate or alternative guarantees nothing.

The multiplication of the "yes" proposes something different – the proliferation of alternatives that never have to become one. There is a growing understanding that if we want to stop capitalism, then we have to stop producing it. But if we want to stop producing capitalism, then instead of stopping producing – and, in an age of immaterial and biopolitical production, stopping living – we must produce something else. Said otherwise, with the understanding that capitalism does not exist as a force foreign to us but is something that we produce everyday, the only way to break out of capitalist flows and intensities is to create new flows and intensities. This is the autonomous project. It is a struggle not based on the object of its critique. Autonomy does involve a refusal, an exodus from the master-slave, capital-labor, oppressor-oppressed relationship and a refusal to be either one. But that

refusal is contingent upon, not a precursor to, the insistence that we can make, and do, and be something else. The desire for something has to be much stronger than the fear of something; the imagination stronger than the rejection. Love, a productive force, has to be stronger than repulsion. This can be understood by looking at concrete autonomous initiatives. Zapatistas are incredibly well-organized, collectively organized. Autonomous municipalities in Chiapas are not "free spaces" where everybody can do whatever they want, but democratic spaces where the community decides collectively what it wants and structures its relations accordingly. They have clear democratic processes for decision-making, delegating tasks, naming and revoking leadership positions, rotating and revolving responsibilities. Rather than "no rule" they practice *mandar obedeciendo*, or rule by obeying. You can certainly choose whether to be Zapatista or not, but this choice involves a commitment to a collective process of survival and self-making, not an individual voluntaristic participation in an "alternative" space. Zapatistas organized for 10 years before the 1994 uprising. Their influence on movements, on thought, on imagination throughout the world has been so deep and long-lasting not because of the novelty of what they have rejected, but because of what they have created – autonomous communities and municipalities, autonomous governing structures and juridical bodies, autonomous health and education systems, autonomous literature and art. All of this is created through organization, and, through all of this are created subjectivities and social relations that truly constitute a different world. Zapatista politics are not something that was decided at the beginning and held onto, but something that had to be recreated and redecided everyday through collective democratic processes.

#### *What this has to do with the World Social Forum*

The World Social Forum is so big and diverse and chaotic that you can't really experience the forum per se. It's more that you have to make-your-own-forum. You have to create a temporary community, a space, a set of social relations that you collectively learn how to conduct differently. You have to expose yourself to difference, invite other worlds into your world, listen, and live out the social forum process together. And then you have to realize that this experience doesn't belong to the World Social Forum. You have to create a world social forum everyday. The forum that takes so much planning and money and logistical support is useful in so far as it creates a laboratory for learning how to do this, one space for doing this broadly. But it is just that, one space, one kind of opportunity for hooking up new nodes and new connections in the network of struggle that is reproduced everyday. The World Social Forum does not have the democratic representation or legitimacy to be anything other than a forum at this point. Those who fret over its lack of clear direction and consensual purpose and plans should worry less about how to create the global movement and realize that the global movement has already created itself.

Those worriers of how to organize the social movements and progressive forces and their detractors who object to organizing the movements and forces, still stick together, and in place, on the idea that this question of organization revolves around creating a representative body to do this. But the connectivity and cooperation, the solidarity and simultaneity of the movement is much more sophisticated than the debates about whether to make official declarations and joint campaigns or the arguments over open space versus organizing space are comprehending. It is done through internet and email. It is done through free software and free radio. It is done through free information, free intellectual property, and, to the greatest extent possible under repressive rule, free movement. It is done through network subjectivities that think of information and art and knowledge and power as something that is created in common and that must be kept moving. That not only do you not get to own it, you don't get to keep it. "It" is constantly transforming and can't be held. You are a node in the P2P network of life and you cannot win anything by accumulation in what is not a zero sum game. You only win through connection, through the ever changing and expanding network. These are the kind of subjectivities created in a global struggle. It is done everyday, by kids in Brazil downloading free software, by women in Chiapas listening to Radio Rebelde, by farmers redistributing native seed

to those who have lost its genetic strain, by authors and artists copylefting their work for free distribution.

At one WSF workshop, Gilberto Gil, Brazilian rock star and current Minister of Culture in Brazil said this of his involvement in the struggle: I am a musician and I am a minister, but above all I am a hacker. He called for a Hacker perspective on the world — not just a way of seeing but a way of being. Not a goddess, not (just) a cyborg, but a hacker.

### *Conclusion*

We need to develop a hacker culture. Not just at the World Social Forum, and not only but especially in the university where intellectual property is a premium, whether that is theory sold in books or scientific discovery sold through corporate funding of research or education sold to the children of those who have plenty of property. At the same workshop, Manuel Castells stated of the researcher's job: my job is to hack. That is the only way this kind of work is done – taking information and experiences and remixing it, sending it out, letting it be remixed again with more information and experience.

The struggle is a hacker's struggle. The hacker's job is not just breaking in and socializing information, but constructing the common: writing new code so the software is better, mixing sound and sight and data to make something new, only it won't stay that way because it will be freely distributed and remixed again. It is the remix of social relations, the power of the social ensemble to rearrange itself, to become something else, to interact differently. The accumulation of hacks is what constitutes the common, a common that is created, not given – and that is global – global not as universal, but as beyond any boundaries, national or commercial, ever imposed other than the planetary ones provided for by the universe.

The mode of production is already there – immaterial labor and the biopolitical. The tools already exist – not just in digital technology but in network subjectivities; it is now a question of struggle. No one, that is, no 'one' can make it happen (no party, no state, no vanguard), we all have to learn to change the code because that is the only way to recreate the system. That is the hacker perspective on the world.

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